

TESTIMONY OF HRH FORCHENMBIN CHARLES ABESSOH
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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, U.S. House of Representatives
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My name is Charles Abessoh Forchenmbin, I am a traditional tribal chief from the South West Anglophone region of Cameroon, a small country in West Africa that was colonized by France and Great Britain. The two predominant languages are French and English—the Francophone area was colonized by France and the Anglophone area was colonized by Great Britain. Anglophones live in the North West and South West of Cameroon, near the border with Nigeria. I come from the South West Anglophone region.

Many people are not aware of how much English-speaking Cameroonians are marginalized in my country--- we are a minority of 20 percent, and are treated like second-class citizens. I was persecuted and tortured by agents from the Cameroonian government, headed by the dictator Paul Biya, for publicly criticizing how Cameroon treats its Anglophone population and for exposing the fraudulent elections that have kept Biya in power for 33 years.

I am chief of a village that produces cocoa, coffee, tomatoes, plantains and corn. We have no electricity, no potable water and no good roads. The government does not invest in either of the two Anglophone regions. Sixty percent of the villages in Francophone areas have potable water, compared to 25% in the two Anglophone regions. This is true despite the fact that the Anglophone areas are very rich in minerals, timber, cocoas, petroleum and palm oil.

I have a Master's Degree in English Modern Letters from Yaounde University—Yaounde is the capital of Cameroon. I could not enter a doctoral program in English at the national university even though I was more qualified than many Francophones. I taught in private and government secondary schools for 22 years. In Cameroon Anglophones are a subjugated minority, they cannot occupy top positions in the civil service, which has most of the good jobs. The government treats us like foreigners—the mayor of the Yaounde City Council even referred to Anglophones as “enemies in the house.” If we accept an inferior role in Cameroon and permanent domination by the Francophone government, we would not be

considered “enemies.” But as soon as we demand to be treated as equals, we become “enemies.”

I started getting involved in politics in the 1990s, following in the footsteps of my father, a village chief who spoke against the mistreatment of the Anglophone minority. The regime maintains the rule of Paul Biya by falsifying election results and intimidating tribal leaders like me by trying to force us to join their election fraud machinery. They tell traditional rulers to place extra ballot boxes in the polling stations and fill them with ballots supporting the ruling party. In return for participating in these corrupt schemes, rulers get monthly “salaries” and civil service jobs

I was the only traditional ruler who refused to go along with this fraud. I took a big risk, because I was already known to the government as an advocate for the Anglophones. But I wanted to promote democracy in my country – democracy is the best type of government for a developing country like Cameroon because it gives equal opportunity to everyone. And it would put an end to the dictatorial regimes in Cameroon and other African countries that continue to persecute people for criticizing the autocratic African governments. I even published a book entitled “The Plight of Freedom Fighters in the Den of Dictators” denouncing the Biya regime and other African dictatorships.

During the 2011 presidential elections, I was the chairperson of a polling station in my town Bafoussam. I had to sign off on the election results, which showed John Fru Ndi, the opposition party’s presidential candidate, as the clear victor. But then I saw a false government report from my polling station identifying Paul Biya as the winner. I printed and distributed the correct and the false election results in flyers to uncover the corruption perpetrated by a government that did nothing for its people and everything for the ruling party. It is because of dictators like Biya that Africans don’t have clean water, health facilities, good transportation and insufficient and poor quality schools. I had a good job as a teacher and was a successful farmer too. But I was inspired by my father and wanted to bring about changes in my community and the entire country.

In 2012, I had to pay a horrible price for exposing election fraud, government corruption and standing up for Cameroon’s Anglophone minority. Five police

officers entered my house and took me to the Bafoussam Central Police Station. For two weeks I was tortured and brutalized, forced to kneel on broken bottles and barbed wires in a horrible cell with poor ventilation. I was accused of inciting civil disobedience and insulting the head of state, Paul Biya. After two horrific weeks, I was released, placed under house arrest and warned not to continue my anti-government activities.

While under house arrest, I submitted a written complaint to the National Commission for Human Rights and Freedom in Yaounde. Everything I did was peaceful, I never held a gun in my life. My pen was my weapon against injustice. But Cameroon's so-called "Human Rights Commission" did absolutely nothing to support me. I expected it to investigate my complaint but no action was ever taken. The Biya regime established this Commission in 1990 to create a façade of democracy—but all it did was collude with the government to repress people's human rights.

My situation became even worse after I violated the house arrest order to attend a court hearing. I had to stop the forced marriage of a 15-year old girl to a 70 year-old man. The girl had been beaten and came to me for protection. I was able to stop the marriage, but the police knew I had left my house. It became too dangerous for me to remain in Cameroon, the police had already tortured me, next time they would kill me if I continued with my anti-government activities.

Police had posted pictures of me in their office – I was a "wanted man." This information was leaked to me by a former student of mine who works with the secret police. If he had not told me this, I would probably be dead instead of talking to you today. This is when I decided to escape to Nigeria, leaving behind my wife, my children, my teaching position and my farm. When I got to Nigeria, the Boko Haram terrorist group was killing Christians like me. I realized I had to get out of there as quickly as possible, I decided to seek protection in the United States.

I crossed the U.S.-Mexican border in 2013 and arrived in San Diego, California. I immediately asked for political asylum. Finally I would be given protection and be allowed freedom of expression, a right guaranteed in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unfortunately I ended up being detained in the Eloy Detention Center in Eloy, Arizona for seven months. My friends and family in the

U.S. and Cameroon raised \$10,000 for a bond so I would be released. I am now waiting for my court date and expect to be granted political asylum.

While I am waiting for my court date, I would like to use this forum to thank the Torture Abolition and Survivors Support Coalition (TASSC) International for their support during this difficult time in my life. They have provided me with essential counseling, medical care and the opportunity for legal advice. And they have been a source of comfort and hope.

In 2013 the U.S. State Department issued a report on Human Rights in Cameroon as part of its annual report on human rights. The Cameroon report discusses numerous human rights violations committed by the Biya regime. These include torture and abuse by security forces and restrictions on freedom of assembly and association, rights guaranteed in Articles 19 and 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Report also says “corruption (is) pervasive at all levels of government.”

Cameroonians appeal to Members of Congress and the Obama Administration to be more forceful in holding their government responsible for these violations. We would like to see a public statement calling on the Biya regime to stop persecuting the Anglophone minority, punishing people like me who oppose election fraud, and end its systematic corruption, a major reason for the extreme poverty we have in Cameroon. US AID should restart its program in Cameroon, which was cancelled in 1994. We need AID assistance for health care, education, gender empowerment, potable water and road construction, especially in the Anglophone regions.

Finally, I appeal to the Lantos Commission and the Obama Administration to hold the Biya regime and other African countries accountable for the torture they systematically carry out against minority groups, human rights defenders and activists in opposition political parties.

Thank you very much for your kind attention in listening to my testimony today. I hope that it will help relieve the suffering of the Cameroonians and people throughout Africa.